

The rout of Nebraska had gotten everyone's attention. It was time to take 11th-ranked Mizzou seriously. In a feature sizing up the 11 remaining undefeated teams, the *Times-Picayune* put the odds of the Tigers getting to New Orleans for the BCS championship game at 21-1. "If this were the Arena Bowl, possibly," the paper wrote. (Citing its favorable conference schedule, Kansas was listed at 18-1.)

In *USA Today*, Steve Wieberg wrote, "Nationwide, the spread is now a staple. But few, if any, are as tricked-out as the one run by the Tigers, who will snap the ball to tight ends and receivers, split out their tackles and, in a typical game, run a half a dozen or more trick plays."

It was what Daniel came to Columbia for. He was playing with a swagger, and his teammates were feeding off him. He was in his element. "I had a lot of say in what plays were called during the week and what I felt comfortable with," he says. "Coach C [Christensen] did a great job of tailoring the offense to what fit me best. We threw the ball around—a lot. We had a lot of these gadget plays. And they always worked. It's fun when you're putting up 400 yards of offense and 30 points."

The prospect of a Norman conquest, however, was daunting. The Tigers hadn't won there since 1966, and with all due respect to Texas and Nebraska, the Sooners were the kings of the Big 12. They were the defending conference champs and had won four of the previous six crowns. Plus, no one defended the Missouri Spread better than OU. In 2006, the Sooners held the Tigers to 10 points and 360 yards, and they intercepted Daniel three times in a 26-10 victory. The line was set at 12 points.

Regardless, from the first snap, the Tigers had the full attention of the Sooners—and their fans. "I remember Gary telling me that after Missouri's first possession, the fans knew his team was good based on the way the crowd reacted," recalls Kelly. "He said the noise level and the intensity changed when we took the ball for the first time."

Mizzou jumped to a 7-0 lead when Maclin scored on a five-yard double reverse around left end. Finally, the Tigers had a burner who could run with, if not blow by, the Sooners. Maclin had been a popular subject of game-week coverage because he had originally committed to OU, only to reconsider and pledge with Mizzou two months later. It was easy to see why Bob Stoops wanted Maclin on his side.

"That in itself was a big deal," Gregorian says of Maclin's signing with the Tigers. "He was a St. Louis guy who not only chooses Missouri, but he chooses them over Oklahoma and in fact turns his back on Oklahoma to do it. That became a big building block. Of course, it's not a big building block unless Jeremy becomes who he did."

Oklahoma rallied for a 17-10 halftime lead, which it extended to 23-10, but Mizzou wouldn't go away. Maclin scored on another double reverse (this one from 10

yards), Jimmy Jackson added a four-yard TD run and the Tigers took a one-point lead into the fourth quarter.

On the Missouri sideline, Williams and his teammates had a difficult time comprehending it all. "Everybody was looking around and thinking, 'Man, we're about to beat OU,' " he says.

If not for two unfortunate breaks during an eight-play stretch early in the fourth quarter, that might well have happened. The first came on a play from the Mizzou 33. Sam Bradford threw deep down the middle into double coverage, but the pass sailed into the waiting arms of Brown, who broke on the ball as he crossed into the end zone. It was as easy a turnover opportunity as the Tigers would have in 2007, the kind of play the defense had been making routinely all year. But the ball slipped through Brown's hands, and five plays later the Sooners punched it in for a touchdown and a 29-24 lead.

Missouri was still brimming with confidence. The offense had scored on its previous two possessions, and with 12:26 left, there was no reason to hit the panic button. On the second snap, however, came the play that essentially sealed the defeat. To this day, plays for the Tigers' no-huddle attack are relayed from the sideline to the field through an intricate array of hand signals. It looks rather silly at times as a handful of assistants go through their gyrations. On second down from the Mizzou 20, 11 Tigers looked to the east sideline for the play. Ten of them got one call. Daniel got another. So when he dashed from right to left in front of his quarterback, Maclin wasn't expecting the ball to be shoved into his mid-section. The ball hit the ground, and linebacker Curtis Lofton scooped up the gift and rumbled 12 yards, dragging Daniel and Maclin into the end zone.

Afterward, OU defensive coordinator Brent Venables credited his unit, and specifically Lofton, saying Maclin dropped the ball because he glimpsed a defender crashing from the outside. Actually, due to a communication problem, a graduate assistant had signaled the wrong play to Daniel.

"To have a lead in the fourth quarter against a top five team on the road, it gives you a lot of confidence," says Daniel. "It was a couple of mistakes here and there."

Pinkel took responsibility after the 41-31 gut-wrencher. "Gosh darn, you take so much pride in being well-coached and doing all the little things," he says. "One thing I had to do was tell my players they had nothing to do with that. It was a coaching error. I went in the locker room and told our players, 'We can beat anybody in the country.' "

Pinkel, says Williams, took the loss harder than any other he can remember: harder than the debacle at Troy, the '06 loss at Iowa State, the Sun Bowl collapse. And while admiring his coach's willingness to take responsibility, Zo would have none of it. "Everyone looked around and said, 'Coach, shut up. We all lost this game together.

We're going to walk out of here with our heads up, talk to the media and go back to work and get this thing going again.' "

Then Williams returned to his locker. He took a seat next to Brown, and he remembers Pig's mentioning how they had let one slip away. "I said, 'I know,' " Williams says. "'Don't you think it's weird that we almost beat OU in Norman?' He said, 'I think we're good.' I said, 'Yeah, me too.' "

No one had time to feel sorry for himself. No. 22 Texas Tech was coming to town, and the Red Raiders led the nation in total offense and passing offense (with a staggering 500.4 yards a game), and they were averaging 50 points. With 31 touchdown passes against only three interceptions, Graham Harrell was slinging it even more than Daniel. It would be the Tigers' third straight game against a ranked opponent. If there was ever an opportunity to mail one in, this was it.

Knowing he had to get his players' undivided attention, Pinkel dropped a bombshell at the captains' meeting. In so doing, he ignored a coaching tenet, did something unheard of in today's one-game-at-a-time cliché-fest. He looked six weeks down the road. "Coach said, 'Anybody been paying attention to KU?' " Williams recalls.

Pinkel told his captains this would be the first and last time he would mention the K word. He said he didn't want to hear anybody talking about it. Then he mentioned he had studied the Jayhawks' schedule and could say with certainty that KU wasn't going to lose any of its next five games. So if the Tigers wanted the Nov. 24 meeting to mean anything, there could be no more of the two-interception, two-fumble, three-sack slop-fests like the one turned in at Oklahoma. He said the message had to be subtly conveyed in the locker room—the 2007 Tigers were a special team, but to have the opportunity to be truly special, they had to win the next five.

"I rarely talk about games, but they were a mature group of kids," says Pinkel. "I flat told them that we knew Kansas was good. I wanted to present the rest-of-the-season story. If you want the big prize at the end, there cannot be any mistakes. We've got to come out focused week in and week out. It wasn't a full discussion. It was easy to get the point across. They were well aware of what was going on."

That they were. "It was no secret anymore," says Rucker.